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Wednesday, June 7, 2006

Rep. Slaughter Addresses Canadian Senate Commerce Committee on WHTI, Border Issues

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY-28), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee, today testified before the Canadian Standing Senate Committee on Banking, Trade, and Commerce.

The Congresswoman's remarks centered on the proposed Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative, and legislation she has brought before the U.S. House - the Protecting American Commerce and Travel Act, or PACT Act - designed to correct inherent flaws in the WHTI plan and maintain a secure northern border that is open to legitimate travel and trade.

A digital audio recording of Rep. Slaughter's address will be available tomorrow morning, Thursday, June 8th.

The complete text of Rep. Slaughter's remarks, as prepared, can be found below:

U.S. Representative Louise M. Slaughter

Testimony in front of the

Canadian Standing Senate Committee on

Banking, Trade, and Commerce

Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative

June 7, 2006

4:00 PM

Thank you Senator Grafstein and Senator Angus for inviting me to testify before this committee. I deeply appreciate the opportunity to offer my perspective on WHTI and the

importance of keeping the northern border open for business.

I will briefly summarize my written remarks and ask that my formal statement be entered into the record. I understand that DHS and State declined to participate in the hearing, so I will ask that past statements that they have made before Congress be entered into the record as well.

Senators, as you know, our nations are bound by shared values, culture, history, and geography. I represent a Congressional district that includes the cities of Niagara Falls and Buffalo. My constituents do not think of themselves as living in a country separate from Canada. Instead, they envision theirs as one united, bi-national community with a river running through it.

The relationships among the members of this community are both close and critically important.

U.S.-Canada trade supports 5.2 million jobs and generates tens of billions of dollars in revenue each year. Western New York's four bi-national bridges, including the Peace Bridge in Buffalo, are some of the busiest in the country. 160 million dollars in trade, and 20,000 vehicles, cross the Peace Bridge every single day.

In addition to its importance to international trade, the Niagara frontier is also a gateway for millions of tourists each year.

Tourism is the fastest growing industry in the Buffalo-Niagara region. Our economy is heavily dependent on Canadian visits to our sporting events, cultural institutions, and local wineries.

A loss of just a fraction of these visitors would prove devastating for the people of Western New York.

And yet, I am convinced that the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative - as it is currently envisioned by the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of State - will destroy the dynamics of our shared border communities.

The U.S. Congress simply must require DHS and State to change course on this pivotal issue. In the post 9-11 world, it is indeed imperative that we know that those entering our countries are who they say they are, mean us no harm, and have the secure documents to prove it. That is the reason why the U.S. Congress, based on a recommendation by the 9/11 Commission, included the WHTI provision in their 2004 Intelligence Reform bill.

WHTI requires DHS and State to implement a plan by 2008 that will require travelers

re-entering the U.S. from the Western Hemisphere to present documents denoting both identity and citizenship.

What has gotten lost during the debate surrounding this bill is that the 9/11 Commission *also* recognized the political and economic importance of keeping our border open to legitimate travelers.

In their report, the commissioners noted that, quote, "our border screening system should check people efficiently and welcome friends. Admitting large numbers of students, scholars, businesspeople, and tourists fuels our economy, cultural vitality, and political reach," end quote.

The Commission understood what DHS and State have unfortunately forgotten: any new border policies must maintain both our homeland security *and* our economic security.

While some may wish for nothing more than for WHTI to go away, it is very unlikely that Congress will rescind it - particularly now.

So the challenge has become how best to address U.S.-Canadian border security, and implement WHTI, in a way that increases security without causing unintentional economic harm.

I have a few ideas that I am confident will answer this challenge and improve this plan.

They are wrapped into bi-partisan legislation I introduced this week called the Protecting American Commerce and Travel Act, or PACT Act. Permit me now to take a moment to explain what my bill will do.

The PACT Act has two parts. The first extends the WHTI implementation deadline from January 2008 to September 2009. I chose September in my legislation because I do not think it makes a whole lot of sense to implement new crossing requirements in the middle of the summer tourist season.

Calls for an extension have been gaining steam as it has become increasingly obvious that DHS and State are unprepared to implement their own plan. Just last week, the Government Accountability Office, which is the non-partisan, investigative arm of Congress, reported back to me on their initial observations of the impending implementation of WHTI.

Their findings were hardly a surprise to those of us who have followed this plan for the past year. GAO confirmed that DHS and State have made few necessary programmatic decisions.

They did not ask for WHTI-related funds in the 2007 federal budget, and have failed to prove their ability to meet the 2008 implementation deadline.

I would like to request that the GAO's report be inserted into the record.

I am confident that Congress will indeed grant DHS and State more time to figure this plan out in concert with the Canadian government.

An extension will give both our governments the time necessary to collaborate and reach common-sense border security solutions.

But as I've always said, it isn't enough to simply put off the day when a new border plan goes into effect. Congress has to step in and fix the plan's inherent problems.

For these reasons, the second part of the PACT Act will do two things: It will first ensure that any alternatives to a passport are secure, low-cost and easily obtainable, and that these

alternatives are worked on together by the U.S. and Canadian governments. And the Act will lay out a series of qualifications and benchmarks that DHS and State must meet in implementing WHTI.

The PACT Act first requires DHS to evaluate existing documents and determine the feasibility of securing them with the features necessary under WHTI. We should avoid creating new cards and more bureaucracy at all costs.

But if this isn't possible, any new developments must take place in a systematic and rational way.

For example: DHS and State have announced that they will create an alternative card, often referred to as the PASS card. Unfortunately, it will cost around 50 dollars, and take 4-6 weeks to obtain.

The simple truth of the matter is that most travelers will not go to the extra expense and time of getting such a card. And so, my legislation caps its cost at 20 dollars, and requires that purchasers receive it in 10 days or less.

WHTI must also expedite the act of crossing the border for low-risk, frequent travelers.

Nearly 50 percent of border crossings are made by just 400,000 people. We need to get these travelers enrolled in programs that make it easy for them to cross the border, and that allow our border inspectors to focus their limited resources on high-risk travelers.

We already have two joint U.S.-Canadian programs that meet these objectives: the NEXUS and FAST programs. But regrettably, a number of barriers, such as the high cost of enrollment and a limited number of enrollment centers, have prevented NEXUS and FAST from reaching their ideal enrollment rate.

The PACT Act will expand both initiatives, and will address the barriers to entry that are holding them back.

More broadly, NEXUS and FAST provide a model for how the U.S. and Canada can work together to achieve stronger security while also facilitating low-risk trade and travel. With all that is at stake for our border economies, both governments should use these programs as a blueprint for the future.

The PACT Act also requires that DHS and State develop a plan to re-admit U.S. travelers into the country who do not possess a passport or an acceptable alternative document.

This provision will allow a spontaneous traveler - such as Aunt Tilly from Kansas - to drive over to Niagara Falls, Ontario for a few hours before heading back to Kansas, without having to go to the expense of purchasing a new document.

Finally - and perhaps most importantly - the Act requires DHS and State to complete a cost-benefit analysis of their final WHTI plan *before* it is implemented.

The completion of such a study will assist DHS in evaluating secure and cost-effective options for implementing WHTI, while avoiding adverse effects on legitimate travel and trade with Canada.

It will force the agencies to prove that the benefits of their final WHTI plan outweigh its costs.

In total, then, the PACT Act is bringing members from both the Democrat and Republican parties together in an attempt to bring common-sense solutions to this critical problem.

My friends: This past weekend's arrests of 17 suspected extremists in Toronto highlight that neither the U.S. nor Canada is immune to terrorism. It is a shared threat, and together we can - and must - harness our resources to keep both of our countries safe. But we simply cannot undermine our economies and our quality of life in the process.

I want you to know that that there are many Members of Congress in America who *do* understand that the current WHTI plan has the potential to inflict major economic damages to both our countries. With their help, and with the leaders here today, I believe that we will fix WHTI, and ensure a smart and secure U.S.-Canadian border for years to come.

Thank you, again, Senator Grafstein and Senator Angus, for inviting me to Ottawa to testify this afternoon. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

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